

## Walking the Past and Present in Istanbul

A city of dreaming spires! No, not Oxford, but Istanbul; not church spires but tall glittering minarets. Since arriving in Istanbul I had, as so many a visitor, probably from Lord Byron onwards, determined to make the most of my brief time there. And I wanted, not only to engage with that elusive spirit of what had once been the fabled city of Constantinople, but also with the real 'feel' of the place – as it is now.

So I had been awed by the well known glories, feted in every guide: The Sultans' Palace, the Blue Mosque, Aya Sofia. I had wandered around the charming back streets and by ways of the residential quarter of the Sultanhammed with its old timber houses; taken tram rides down into the port, a ferry out to the islands, even a boat tour of the Bosphorus up to the Black Sea. I had dropped into different eateries, cafes and restaurants, tried Turkish tea, coffee, ice cream and delight. Yet, as my final day approached, something, I felt, was still missing. As an anthropologist I need to feel some deeper connection to the real spirit of a place and its people, and it is too easy for this to disappear completely beneath the gaudy veneer of modern commercial tourism. India, Ecuador and Peru last year, and now Turkey: the ethnic detail may have differed, but the process is identical. The industry packages culture and sells it piece meal to the visitors. For all the splendour of palaces, mosques and churches, the mystique of ancient weedy ruins, the calls to prayer echoing city-wide from so many lofty graceful minarets, the real character of the place yet remained teasingly elusive.

So I had been in Istanbul for nearly a week by the time I happened upon Les Arts Turcs. I had a single day left and determined not to waste it wandering around the Sultanhammed being accosted by souvenir sellers or touts. It is the kind of organisation I always prefer to patronise – not exactly a tour operator, but something rather subtler and offering more of the 'real' (read authentic) experience of a place – acting more as a sort of 'honest broker' between culture and visitor. I had originally gone to the office to enquire about the Dervish Whirling ceremony, but found myself signing up for a personal guided tour of the lesser known parts of the old city too, through some of the most traditional quarters that otherwise I would never have seen. I was taken by a very congenial, knowledgeable 'host' and spent a delightful day, not just walking and site seeing, but exchanging sundry stories, histories and philosophies too. We visited parts of the city that had, back in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries been home to Greek Orthodox and Jewish (Sephardic) immigrants, now home to the Romany community and, latterly, to artists, writers and intellectuals too. Finally we took the cable car high up the hillside to visit the old Islamic cemetery and enjoy the splendid vistas across the Golden Horn, before returning to visit the better known Grand and Spice Bazaars, through bustling traditional street markets. Later that evening,

with the full moon rising above the ancient city walls, we visited the *sema* - the Dervish community and its famed Whirling ceremony and dance. It was a wonderful, memorable day and way to end my visit to a such a city. Now I can say I really have seen Istanbul; and felt - if briefly - a little of its deeper pulse too. Perhaps one day I'll return for a more in depth experience!